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BALTIMORE SUN OP ED

To boost Baltimore and the region, support the port

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake says the Port of Baltimore needs an intermodal transit facility to improve on current success

By Stephanie Rawlings-Blake

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As we talk to business leaders about ways to grow the Baltimore region's economy and ask where they see the greatest opportunities, the Port of Baltimore is mentioned at the top of everyone's list.

Throughout the nation's recent economic challenges, the port has remained one of our core strengths. Along with areas such as health care and research, the port has proven to be a source of much-needed growth for our region — from a 40 percent increase in the value of cargo shipped through the port during the first six months of 2011, to another record year for cruise passengers. Our port leads the country in a number of cargo categories, including cars, imported wood and paper products, and roll-on-roll-off equipment.

All of this activity supports more than 50,000 direct, indirect and induced jobs (those created by port workers' spending) for all skill levels and roughly \$5.6 billion in spin-off economic activity in Baltimore and the region. The port is an important part of our goal to grow the city's population by 10,000 families over the next 10 years by creating new employment opportunities for city residents. And the future offers exciting possibilities for the port — provided we take appropriate steps to maintain and expand our region's competitive edge.

Fortunately, under the leadership of Gov. Martin O'Malley, our state has had the foresight to prepare the port for the upcoming expansion of the Panama Canal and the giant cargo ships that will soon be traveling across from the Pacific Ocean and Asia. A public-private partnership has enabled dredging and other work that will ensure that Baltimore will become one of only two East Coast ports able to handle these ships and their valuable cargo.

This new surge in imports and exports is projected to result in thousands of new jobs and millions in new economic activity — not just for Baltimore, but across the metro region. We must act swiftly to take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity.

The work along Baltimore's waterfront is well under way. This year alone, the city is reconstructing Broening Highway and Newkirk Avenue at a cost of more than \$20 million to

support critical port infrastructure. But there remain key steps our region must take to ensure that Maryland can serve as a gateway for shipping goods from the Port of Baltimore to new markets up and down the East Coast and deep into the Midwest.

We need to develop the infrastructure to ensure that more cargo can be efficiently transported to and from the port in a way that makes economic sense for shippers. Specifically, we need to develop the capacity for trains with double-stacked containers — a huge step toward ensuring that Maryland will move forward as a hub for rail cargo transportation.

In a world with unlimited financial resources, the ideal solution would be to simply expand the height of the Howard Street rail tunnel — or replace it with a new tunnel under the city — to ensure that double-stacked trains could easily move up and down the tracks, directly to the port. But at a cost of anywhere from \$1 billion to \$3 billion, and with future federal transportation cuts looming, it's just not affordable right now.

In these economic times, we have to find realistic solutions that are affordable and practical and that leverage private-sector investment. For our rail transportation needs, that means the development of a "Baltimore-Washington Rail Intermodal Facility" somewhere along the rail corridor between Baltimore and Washington.

Such a facility would allow containers to be quickly transported from the port and then transferred to double-stacked trains. Our state government, recognizing the economic benefits to Maryland, has agreed to contribute to the facility, with CSX Transportation agreeing to pay for the rest. A federal process is now under way to select a location for this facility, looking at Anne Arundel, Howard and Prince George's counties.

Having spent the past year as the chairwoman of the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, I have gained a deeper appreciation for thinking regionally on freight movement and its direct relationship to jobs and economic growth. When a new opportunity comes to Howard County, or Baltimore County, or Baltimore City, it helps boost all of us.

The truth is, our port makes Baltimore relevant in the global economy and is an economic engine that serves as a pillar of growth for our city. Moving forward with an intermodal facility — in a way that makes sense for our state, our port, and the private sector — is critical to keeping that engine humming. As an additional benefit for everyone who commutes in our region each day, driving more freight traffic onto rail reduces emissions, costs and wear and tear on our roads.

To grow Baltimore, all of us recognize that we must find ways to increase jobs and expand economic opportunities for both our current residents and those we hope will join us in the city. Preparing the Port of Baltimore and our region for the expansion of the Panama Canal is one of those crucial opportunities. Baltimore needs your support to make it happen. Today, Baltimore is ahead of our competitors. Let's not allow our competitive edge slip away.

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